# VIDEO GAMES

™

Atari Coin-Op Division's Dynamic Duo

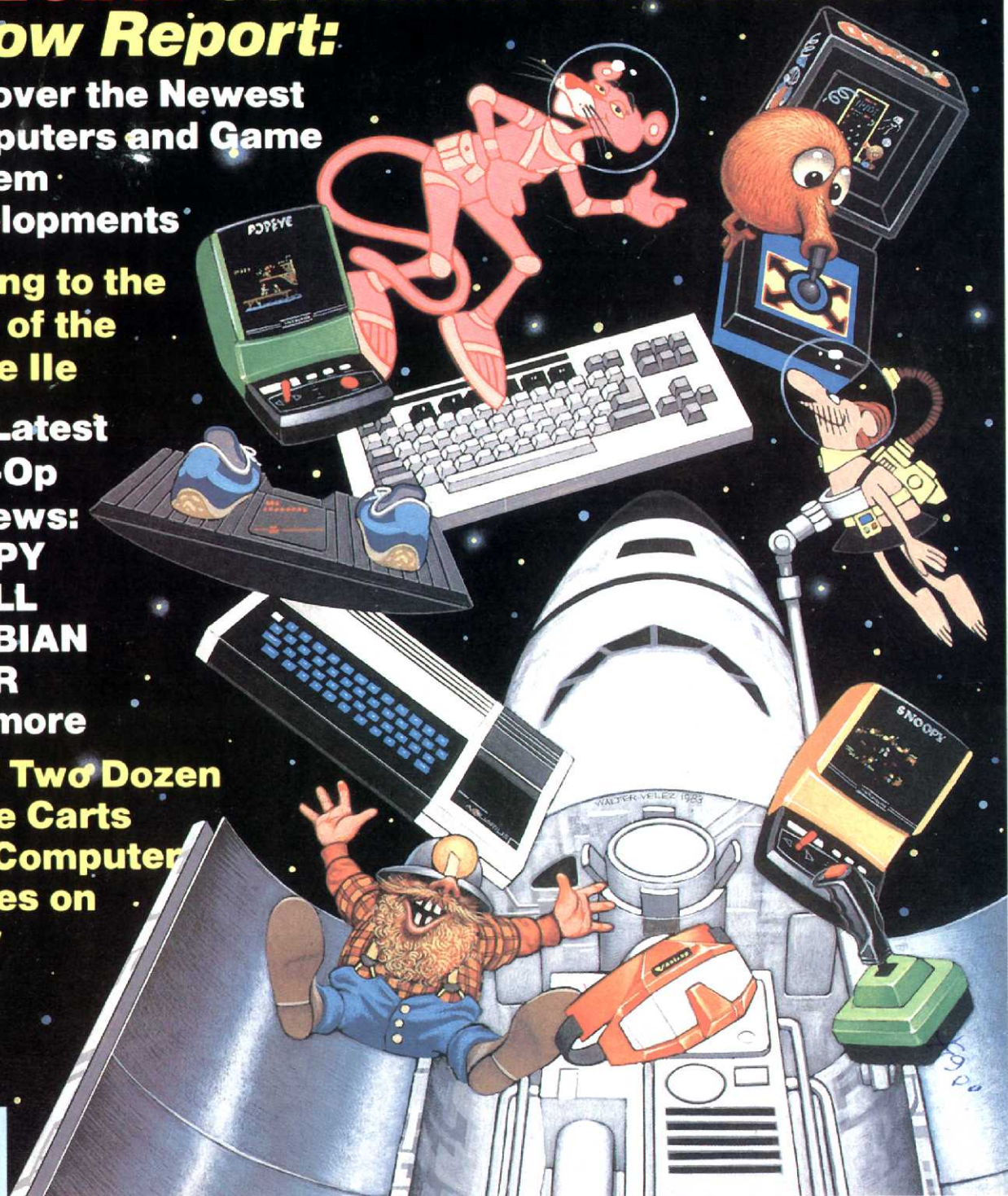## SPECIAL Consumer Electronics Show Report:

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# Games for the Astrocade: An Evolutionary Profile

## By Mark Brownstein

At the time of its introduction, the Bally Professional Arcade was touted as a game machine. Although the Arcade hit the market at about the same time that Atari was introducing its VCS, it never garnered the interest or market power which the VCS earned.

The commercial failure was due to many factors: it cost $299, compared to the VCS' approximately $199; it was on far fewer store shelves (so less shoppers knew of it); and it had quality-control problems, which have been detailed in earlier issues of *VIDEO GAMES*. The ability of the Arcade, now the Astrocade, to play games was far better than the Atari VCS and, in some cases, is still superior to state-of-the-art game equipment, despite its low resolution by today's standards.

At first, Arcade owners had to be content with playing the games that Bally/Midway trickled out. The games were good for their time, but most fall far short of today's standards. The original unit included Gunfight, a once-innovative game that has weathered the test of time as well as could be expected. Such games as Pinball, Football, Baseball/Tennis/Hockey/Handball (especially Baseball), Seawolf/Missile and Star Battle are still fun to play. Pinball (now called Astrocade Pinball) remains the best pinball simulation available on any home game system.

In late 1978, the Bally BASIC programming cartridge was released. With this cartridge and an optional interface, games could be designed by Arcade owners, recorded onto a tape cassette.

and played at a later time. Almost simultaneously, the flow of new game cartridges from Bally was slowing from a trickle to a virtual halt.

Those two events helped create a whole new, although initially small, industry: the design and sale of third-party Bally Professional Arcade games and utility programs. In effect, any Bally Professional Arcade owner who also had the BASIC cart and recording interface could design and debug a game in BASIC language. The debugged game could then be duplicated onto cassettes

and sold to others who had a similar set-up.

This is, in fact, what actually happened. The original, and longest lived, user's group newsletter, *The Arcadian*, began carrying advertisements and reviews of the newly available cassette-loaded software. Through the years, many individuals and firms have successfully marketed their own specially written programs through the *Arcadian*, and, in at least one case, Esoterica, Ltd. has developed to the point of setting up its own distribution network.

The new Astrocade BASIC cartridge, released in 1982, made a few improvements over the old BASIC cartridge. It allowed recording and loading programs at a much more rapid rate, making what would have been a five- to six-minute program into a 30 second load operation. It also had a built-in interface, which allowed connection to a cassette recorder without the need for a separate interface. In effect, all new owners of Astrocade units were potential game, and utility, program buyers, since the new units had the Astrocade BASIC cartridge included with the game system.
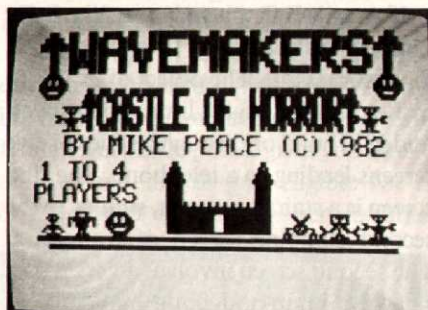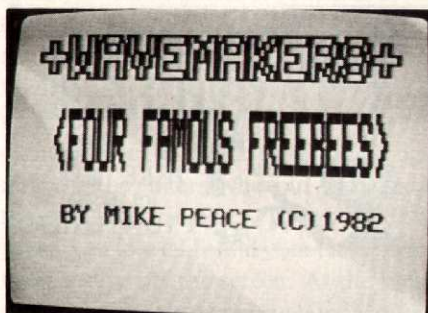
The earlier cassette-load games were programmed entirely in BASIC. The problems with programming in BASIC are that normally you can show only two colors on the screen at one time (although there are tricks to get around that problem), and all programs have to go through BASIC language. In this case, what happens is that the taped program is loaded into the cartridge, the BASIC cartridge then decodes the message and converts it into machine language, which the computer understands, and, finally, the game play begins. If you hit your fire button during a game, the BASIC cartridge has to convert that signal into a code which the computer can understand, and finally your shot appears on the screen. What this does is *slow the game down.*

The earlier games were, for the most part, slow to respond and fairly simple to play. This was due to a limitation in memory available for BASIC programming (approximately 1.8K) and the limitations already described. Another problem involved the occasional difficulty with loading the games into the Astrocade: although the Astrocade BASIC was more forgiving of errors, both systems were relatively sensitive to volume and tone settings. As a rule, the less expensive recorder/players worked best in loading through the BASIC cartridge.

In most of the following reviews, the tape comes with at least two games, one on each side of the tape. The games usually cost between $10 and $18 each; that's quite a value compared to the cost of cartridge-loaded games.

**Flying Ace,** Wavemaker's second game tape, is an interesting concept which makes very good use of the slow



response time inherent in BASIC language programming. You are in the cockpit of an old fighter plane (no jets here), and the enemy bi-plane comes into view. By steering your joystick, you line the evasive plane in the crosshairs, squeeze the trigger, and...zap (no kid-



ding, it either says "zap" or "pow"), the enemy spirals downward, leaving a black trail in its wake.

The slow response of the game is ideal, since it simulates what must actually happen in a real bi-plane—you give it left rudder, but it takes awhile for the plane to actually turn left. In order to shoot, you have to be a deadeye, and be able to keep up with the fighter. You are also running on a tight schedule—take too long to shoot the enemy, and it's curtains for you. Do a great job and you get bonus planes.

On the flip side of this tape is **Clue,** a thinking game: You are given a variety of clues and characters and must solve the mystery (whatever it is). By careful deduction, someone (this is a one- to four-player game) may solve the mystery. If you like slow brain games, with sparse graphics, computer Clue is a winner. Otherwise, stick to Flying Ace. Overall, this is a cart which is well worth the money.

Next on the agenda is Wavemaker's cartridge #12, with **Castle of Horror** on one side and **Four Famous Freebies** on the other. Castle of Horror has been described as an "adventure game." The basic premise is that you are locked in a room, surrounded by a "hoard of horri-

fying monsters" with "only your wits and skill to beat them."

Castle of Horrors presents a supposedly castle-shaped box, which is empty except for your man and a selection of monsters. Once you eliminate the monsters, you may pass to another room. In order to eliminate a monster, you must trick two into running into each other, or trick a monster into running into a block which you throw in its way, or trick him into running into a wall. If your timing's good, you can try to throw a block at the monster. The mechanics of the game are confusing; game play is not what it should be, since only one character at a time is moving on the screen (you can't tell which way the monster will turn until it's too late). Block throwing is also a slow, seemingly random device. Beating the game isn't easy. If you can time it right, and you feel you're outnumbered, there is a sometimes-open escape hatch at the bottom of the screen. If you use it, the message "Chicken" flashes on the screen, and the picture scrolls to another, identical castle. At higher levels, game play becomes more difficult. If you advance to these levels, however, you should probably have the play mechanics down pretty well...if it's worth the trouble.

The other side of the tape contains four games. The first, **Invasion Force,** is a Space Invaders-type game, with rows of blocks moving from side to side, and working their way down. You move a
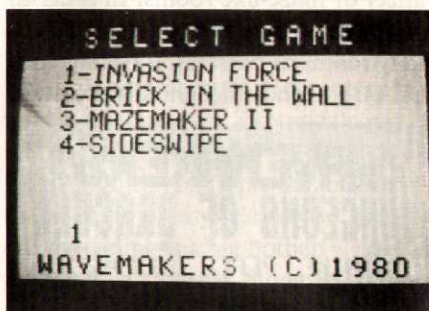


device at the bottom of the screen and try to shoot the boxes before they reach bottom. The boxes don't drop bombs—they just keep moving. The second game isn't any better. Called **Brick in the Wall,** this game is a slow version of Breakout, with a great deal of disconcerting blinking which marks the progress of the "ball."

The third game is by far the most challenging. **Mazemaker II** gives you

randomly-drawn mazes which consist of vertical lines with breaks somewhere between the top and bottom, and a bunch of notches on the left and right sides. You have to guide a series of dots through the maze. If you touch a side of the maze, you lose that turn. Complete the maze, and it tells you how many tries it took. If you don't like a particular maze, a squeeze of the joystick will get you a new maze.

Game play isn't as easy as it sounds. The moving dots are not very responsive; the joystick is too sensitive to motion, and often an attempted move up, down, left or right turns into a diagonal move directly into a wall of the maze. To complicate things further, the dots increase in speed making for a quite challenging test of timing and hand-eye coordination. A refreshing change of pace, this maze doesn't even look like Pac-Man, doesn't play like Pac-Man, and doesn't even have anything to pick up on the way through.

The last game is **Sideswipe**, a slow car race game in which your car scrolls from the top of the screen *down* (instead of the usual bottom to top of most games), through a scrolling curved road. It doesn't play well. If you were to buy the tape, buying it for Castle of Horror (if you like this sort of frenzied game) and Mazemaker II should be reason enough. One other thing: the action in the castle is accompanied by some very organ-ish melodies, a nice additional touch.

**Dungeons of Dracula** places you in a variety of maze-like rooms. In order to win the game, you must pass through as many rooms as possible. Blocking your trail are bats and other ghoulish beasties.
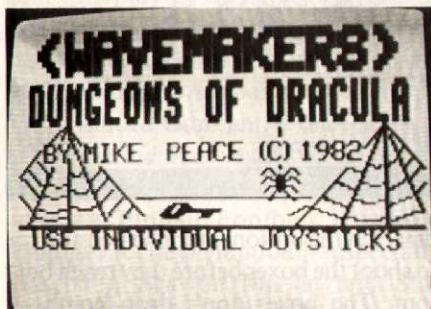


As you travel through the room, you leave behind links of a chain. If you are able to surround the monster with the chain, you can then pick up the key which is also in the room, and progress to the next room. (If you get really stuck, you can always go out the back door, to a completely new maze—not worth any

more points, but safer.) Unlike the other games, this version comes with two basic variations of the same game: Each allows up to four players, one version allows each player to use a separate controller, and the other game requires all players to use the *same* controller.



If Atari's E.T. played more like **L.T., Little Terrestrial** it may have been much more successful. The object of L.T. is to maneuver the ugly little alien over, under, around or through a series of five screens leading to a telephone. The first screen is a stairstep screen, similar to the second climbing screen of Kangaroo. The second screen involves a very tricky sideways jump-and-climb maneuver in which you must transport L.T. from bottom to top along floors which have holes scrolling through them. T'ain't easy. The third through fifth screens are increasingly difficult. In the event you conquer all five screens, a message appears: "L.T. gets in trouble and is sent back to start over. THIS TIME WON'T BE AS EASY AS THE ONE BEFORE." Although there is only the one game on this tape, it is an enjoyable, challenging contest.

In the last year or two, game players have become spoiled. And that's good. The public has come to expect good graphics and good game play. In order to make the Astrocade jump through the same hoops as the competition, the software developers have increased their sophistication.

In a manner somewhat comparable to recent Atari VCS designers' developing new ways to get the VCS to behave graphically and in game play, the Arcade programmers have done things which were probably not imagined by the system's designers. Through special coding, the game information on the cassettes has been modified so that it bypasses the BASIC language (which slows the games down) and loads directly into the processor in machine code. The amount of memory has also been

increased by manipulating screen memory.

Screen memory is a special area of the hardware design of the Astrocade. About half of the memory is unused during normal operating of the system. The designers have, in effect, blacked out the lower half or so of the screen, and used it to store game data. The machine language programs have improved the degree of resolution and game speed. Although they don't match arcade quality, many of the machine-language (or quasi machine-language) games do play quite well.

In the area of graphics, particularly, L&M Software has done some remarkable things. Although they would deny it vociferously, L&M's Nautilus and Exitor's Revenge are both very similar games. **Nautilus** is, as the name implies, a submarine game. You are commanding a submarine, which can be moved across the bottom of the screen. Overhead is a scene of a little port, with battleships in the water. At the top of the
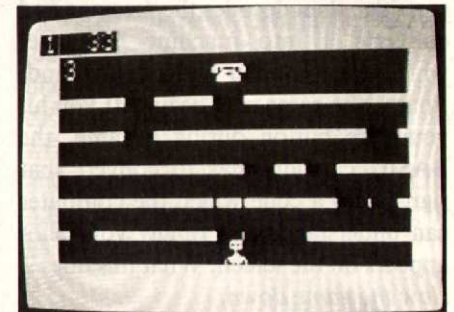


screen, a bat-like "battle star" (in L&M's words) is overhead, releasing a drone fighter. Your mission is to get under the drone, squeeze the trigger, and zap it. The game starts out easy, but gets increasingly difficult as it progresses.

On the flip side is a routine game of **3-D Tic Tac Toe**, the review copy of which wouldn't load onto my Astrocade despite numerous tries. Perhaps their production copies will work.

Exitor's **Revenge** carries the Nautilus theme even further. After being defeated by the Nautilus, the attack now moves to a nicely drawn, stylized city. A battle star sits overhead, and Exitor's warriors sweep across the middle of the screen. You maneuver your weapon along the bottom, firing little dots. (I'm sure they are called something else, but that is exactly what you are shooting.) The dots scroll slowly up the screen—if they hit the warrior, it explodes and a new one is released. You are protected by a shield,

which the battle star continues to shoot. So you have to be careful to be in the right spot to shoot the warrior, while at the same time staying under an increasingly disintegrating shield. The ability to line up your little dot so that it hits the warrior isn't easy. Exitor's Revenge pro-



vides a complex graphic with interesting, though sometimes frustrating, game play.

On the flip side is **The Mummy's Treasure** — a virtually graphics-free game. It consists of three screens of 60 boxes each. You pick a box, and the display tells you what you got. The game is somewhat reminiscent of the old *Concentration* game. The object is to get to the dungeon of the Mummy's Castle and find the treasure before your opponents do, and before the Mummy gets you. There are three levels: the attic, dungeon and starting floor. Mummy's Castle is a slow, challenging brain game...with random Mummies thrown in to draw the game to a speedy conclusion.

The winner of the Graphics Derby so far must be L&M's **Secret of Pellucitar.** The object here is to maneuver your dot (impossible on a small TV screen) through a series of mazes from the out- side of an underground city, into the



SECRET OF PELLUCITAR

city, and finally to a passageway to the treasure. When you get there, you get your score and a ranking. If you hit a wall, you lose points, and the screen col- or changes. To complicate matters, sec- tions of the internal maze randomly change, so that your potential shortcut may turn into a game-ending dead end.

There are five difficulty levels, and two versions: a one-player and a two-player game. The music by George Moses (more on him later) is terrific.

L&M's **Candyman** has only a very slight similarity to Pac-Man. In Candy- man, you must maneuver your character through a candy factory, which has life- savers (or whatever they want to call them) littering the corridors. If you pick up all the candy, you progress to a more difficult level. Complicating your prog- ress are the jokers who put the candy there in the first place. If you touch a joker, you lose a life and your candyman takes a dive off the screen. At the right side of the screen, a gremlin hops around inside a cage (*ala* Donkey Kong).

With each new screen, the pace quick- ens, and more jokers and gremlins jump in, making the game increasingly dif- ficult. Every 2500 points gives you an ex- tra life and makes you eligible for a bonus round, in which the screen turns
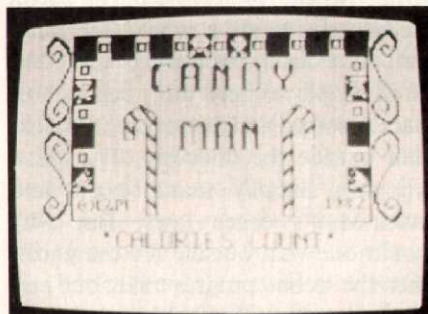


blue, and you get a turn to eat the gremlins and jokers for extra points. What makes this game special is the 'animation. All the characters actually move; arms and legs move, the caged gremlin really jumps. At higher levels, there are as many as six characters in ad- dition to the candy man, all animated and none blinking. There are 25 possible levels of game play. The game plays well, is graphically unique, and is a remark- able achievement for a tape-loaded game. On the other side of the tape is **River City Gambler**, a computer rolled game of dice. The instructions are not very clear, and could confuse you until you somehow figure out the mechanics. If you buy the tape just for playing Candyman and enjoy Gambler, that's great. Candyman is something of a mile- stone for all the animation programmed into it and is worth the money for that feature alone, if you are serious about collecting the best for the system.

Esoteria, Ltd. is one of the

oldest and largest providers of software for the Astrocade. They began with BASIC language programs, but also ad- vanced into Machine language pro- grams, with an attractive, well-designed package. **Road Toad** is their first Machine language effort; a Frogger- like contest in which you make your frog jump across the highway, without being run over by the cars, trucks, and occa-



sional dragster. The graphics are vivid, with cars and frogs moving on a black background.

Road Toad does have limitations: you must be careful that the car or truck is *really* past you before you jump behind it. Until you learn to wait a second before moving, you will probably lose your frog to the vehicle's exhaust. Se- cond, there's a minor glitch in the pro- gram (which doesn't affect game play— at the top of the screen, your frog's ghost may remain until swept clear by a pass- ing car. Finally, and probably most important, this game, as with the other Esoterica games, doesn't really contain complete instructions. Operation of the program is different from the others reviewed here. With the other tapes, when a game is over, you squeeze the trigger to start over. Esoterica's games require you to press "go" on the keypad. Once you figure this out, reset- ting a game is easy—until you figure it out, reloading is a big bother.

Esoterica's **Super Slope** is a skiing game. You control the skier by moving your joystick in the direction you want him to move. If you move too far, his skis go against the direction of travel and he stops. With practice, you can get him down the slopes, around the trees and rocks, to the finish line. The sound of skis on snow, and the nicely scrolling patterns of trees and rocks are welcome features on this game. There is no second game on this cartridge—but if you like ski games, you shouldn't be disap- pointed by Super Slope. ▲